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What does the Ethnic Costume Represent?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haji OH

Visiting Scholar / York Centre for Asian Research, 2008–2009

Ph.D. Candidate / Graduate School
Division of Fine Arts / Kyoto City
University of Arts

Clothes are inseparably related to our daily life. They not only protect the body, but also enable expression of one's identity through design, color, and so on. In particular, an ethnic costume is a strong statement of individual circumstances. It is unique and has a cultural background. It has symbolic value because it stands for ethnicity, gender, religion and emphasizes social belonging. Thus, ethnic costumes have two features—one as a private “second skin” and the other as a “symbol” of social belonging.

I have created art works using ethnic costumes as a motif based on my experiences as a *Zainichi* person, a Korean born and raised in Japan.

Focusing on these two features, I will elucidate a relationship between private and social space. I will suggest that it is not impossible to imagine aspects of a historical relationship when we see the Korean ethnic costume, *hanbok*, in Japanese society. The *hanbok* is an “ethnic costume” that cannot simply be dismissed as clothes but, more significantly, is a material symbol that forces on one’s consciousness the subtle implications of a shared historical relationship between Japan and Korea. In other words, investigating an ethnic costume such as *hanbok* can indicate how the past and present are intricately woven into a fabric of social relationships.

I have created art works using ethnic costumes as a motif based on my experiences as a *Zainichi* person, a Korean born and raised in Japan. It is on the basis of these experiences that I would like to suggest how art can help express the identity of a *Zainichi* within a specific social and historical context of a community.

Wedding dress for minority race, 2000

Background of “Zainichi” in Japan



Wedding dress for minority race, 2000.
Material: Used kimono fabric, silk yarn
Technique: Patch-work, sewing machine work

This work is a Japanese kimono recreated in the Korean *hanbok* style to be worn at weddings. I made this dress by cutting, stitching and restyling a Japanese kimono to create a dress. The undergarment worn beneath this dress is also red in colour and is made of the Japanese kimono fabric called *nagajuban*. Through this wedding dress, I explore what it means to belong to a “minority race”—the *Zainichi*—living in Japan.

I made this dress as a sample of my artwork before completing my undergraduate studies. At that time, I was trying to explore what it meant to be a *Zainichi* and more specifically what it meant to create an ethnic costume representing the identity of a *Zainichi* woman in Japanese society. I had never deeply thought about the meaning of *Zainichi* in Japanese society until then.

Zainichi is a short form for *Zainichi Kankoku/Chosenjin*. It means a person who is of Korean origin but who resides in Japan. While Korean-Japanese might be simply equated with Japanese-Canadian in English, this description is not sufficient

to describe their status. The word *Zainichi* implies that she/he is a Korean who was forced to move and live in Japan before and during the Second World War. The Japanese occupied the Korean peninsula during the Second World War, and it was only on August 15, 1945 that this occupation ended. At the end of the Second World War, about half of those Koreans who lived in Japan returned to Korea. Around 600,000 Koreans remained in Japan. At present, there are approximately 590,000 Korean residents in Japan, the second largest ethnic community after the Chinese. About 420,000 of them are *Zainichi* with special permanent residence in Japan, but who are not recognized as naturalized citizens of Japan. I am a third generation *Zainichi* born in Japan.

When I was studying art as an undergraduate, I was unaware of the political implications of my work. I was content with my status of being born in Japan, and I did not dwell on the political implications of exactly how my art reflected my identity as a *Zainichi*. Questions such as: How am I a *Zainichi*?; What does it mean to be a *Zainichi*?; and What is the significance of my special permanent residence in Japan?; these questions surfaced subtly in my works, but not explicitly.

I have studied in Japanese public schools and at a Japanese university. During these years, I was never presented with any opportunity to learn the Korean language. In history books, there were only brief references to the historical relationship between Korea and Japan. These were occasional and cursory. Yet this lack of textbook knowledge did not prevent me from being aware of social discrimination against *Zainichi*. Ironically, it was in primary school itself, in a class on human rights education, where I learned about practices of anti-*Zainichi* discrimination. The purpose of the class was to teach about non-discrimination, but for me it was an occasion to create a consciousness of myself as a *Zainichi* who, therefore, could be susceptible to practices of social discrimination. Any further exploration about the meaning or root of *Zainichi* was omitted after this period of my education. A Japanese education system that does not provide *Zainichi* with the means to explore their roots, history, and status is a problem. The problem affects not only *Zainichi* but also Japanese students, as it deprives both these ethnic groups of

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the possibility of exploring their historical relationship. The lack of social space encouraging such explorations means that both *Zainichi* and the Japanese cannot talk about it. They have to keep silent.

When I was a high school student, I told my friends that I was a *Zainichi* person. It was like a “coming out,” for stating my identity took some courage. Fortunately, most of my friends’ reactions were along the lines of, “nothing is going to change.” My reaction was one of relief, but there was also a sense of discomfort and uneasiness in my mind. I realized that this affirmative statement of “nothing is going to change” was not based on recognition of our differences, but was more a result of our mutual ignorance of our historical relationship. My friends could not share in my “coming out,” my acknowledgement of *Zainichi* identity. This lack of sharing, the lack of knowledge about our collective pasts, cast a shadow on my private relationships.

Under these circumstances, while I learned about my identity as a *Zainichi* from my family, the existence of this identity continued to be negated by social and educational institutions in Japan. I came to recognize that *Zainichi*, the Japanese label for people like me, cannot be considered a “subject” except as an “other” in a social structure. It is this dilemma that I, as a *Zainichi*, am compelled to address; a dilemma which is often phrased in the form of the question: Am I Japanese or Korean?

I tried to address this dilemma by creating a Korean wedding dress out of a Japanese kimono. By cutting and stitching pieces of fabric belonging to one ethnic costume onto another, I tried to represent this unique *Zainichi* identity in this red dress. It reflected my belief that, “it is not necessary to belong to only one side” and that the two identities could mutually create something different and unique.

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Roots, 2001

About two names, a real Korean name and a Japanese alias



Roots, 2001.

Material: Polyester, silk yarn

Technique: Silkscreen printing, sewing machine work

This dilemma is perpetuated by the fact that most *Zainichi* have two names. My Korean name is Haji OH, and my Japanese name is Natsue Okamura.

My next art work is a white dress that again represents the *hanbok* style of Korean ethnic costumes. This dress has *chima chogori* as a motif. *Chima* means a skirt and *chogori* means a jacket. I printed my family tree on the surface of this jacket using the silkscreen print technique and did embroidery on it. I photographed this dress with a necklace hanging from the ceiling with a pendant containing a photograph of mine beside it.

I talked about the dilemma of being *Zainichi* in Japanese society earlier. This dilemma is perpetuated by the fact that most *Zainichi* have two names. My Korean name is Haji OH, and my Japanese name is Natsue Okamura. When I started to exhibit art works as an undergraduate student, I used Haji OH as my artist name. Since then, I have used both names.

In 1940, the Japanese government forced the *Zainichi* to adopt Japanese names—if they refused, they could not get food rations or education. These subtle but coercive measures compelled them to choose Japanese names for themselves. The reason why some of them have continued today to use Japanese names is that they have used them since birth and are familiar with them. On the other hand, some *Zainichi* have changed their name from Japanese to Korean in the process of their lives, because they know how these names came about historically. Some of my *Zainichi* friends changed from their Japanese alias to their real Korean name when they were undergraduate students. At present, some *Zainichi* keep Japanese names, while others use their Korean names. But using a Korean name reveals their identity as a *Zainichi* in a Japanese-dominated society.

I think I can express my identity as a *Zainichi* by using both my names. But sometimes, the situational use of both names for one's own convenience becomes a subject of criticism among nationalist, pro-Korean *Zainichi*. Some of them say we should use our Korean names to assert our historical roots with Korea, and refuse to use Japanese names as an act of resistance. I think the reasons behind this decision are important since it acknowledges our history. At the same time, we also have to be realistic about the difficulties that arise when one has used a name since birth and is then expected to

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change it suddenly for political and historical reasons. This can cause a real disruption in one's identity.

I am aware of my historical roots and can empathize with *Zainichi* nationalists. I try to use both my Korean and Japanese names in public and private spaces. When I work as an artist and a teacher, I use my Korean name. I am aware that using my Korean name in public has political implications. At the same time, using two names publicly makes me sometimes more accessible to those sharing similar experiences. In private space, it might be possible to insist on only one name, perhaps my Korean name, but I do not wish to totally identify myself with the sentiments of *Zainichi* nationalists. I prefer to use both names because it encourages my interactions with family and friends to be based on affection and emotional bonding and not simply on ethnic or nationalist political considerations. I do sometimes find it difficult to separate public and private spaces in my life. I think that by using my Japanese name I sometimes relieve myself of the historical burden of being *Zainichi*.

My embroidered *chima chogori* in *hanbok* style with my family tree printed by silkscreen on the jacket surface indicates my Korean roots. The creation of this dress with my family tree helped me to reflect on my historical roots as a *Zainichi* and then make a decision with regard to using both my Korean and Japanese names.

Sange, 2005

Representation of ethnic costume



Sange, 2005.

Material: Silk, Used kimono fabric, Sa

Technique: Printing -i-kat, silkscreen printing

My third art work shows an organdy curtain dropping from the ceiling over a dress. The dress has a long silk undergarment which I dyed a deep red. On top of this is worn a jacket and a skirt. The jacket is woven from silk and the skirt is stylized from a Japanese kimono undergarment, the *nagajuban*.

Underneath the organdy curtain, I have placed petals made from silk surrounding the dress. On these petals, I have printed words from a song. The dress is displayed on a set with media installations such as a television screen beside it. There are also photographs showing a model wearing the dress.

The song printed on the red flower petals is written

in *katakana*. *Katakana* is an alphabet of Japanese syllables, but the song is from Korea. I found the sound of the song so appealing that I memorized it without understanding its meaning. At that time, I could not speak or read Korean so I did not know the meaning, but I liked it nonetheless. The television screen sometimes shows hands continuously working on a loom.

This dress is different from a *chima chogori*. To understand this difference, we first have to understand how the *chima chogori* is viewed in Japanese society.

At present, it is possible to wear *chima chogori* when attending different ceremonies, such as weddings, commencements, and coming-of-age-ceremonies. I like wearing a *chima chogori* whenever I have an opportunity, but I need to consciously fortify my resolve in order to do so. This is because *chima chogori* is closely identified as being the dress of a *Zainichi*. There is a difference in the perceptions of my wearing *chima chogori* and of those who are seeing me wear it. This is because, in Japanese society, any woman wearing a *chima chogori* is stared at with antipathy, admiration and sometimes envy, which can cause pressure for the person wearing it.

A gaze filled with antipathy conveys a sense of “detestation” towards a *Zainichi*. It sees the *chima chogori*, not as a dress to be worn on a special day or even daily wear, but as a representation of the history between Japan and Korea.

An admiring or envious gaze might be considered well meaning. However, the question that needs to be asked is: Well meaning for whom?

Many people have told me that they stared at women wearing *chima chogori* because it is very beautiful, and they were drawn in by ribbons worn with the dress waving in the wind. I have heard this sort of story from both Japanese men and women.

The *chima chogori* has a sexual appeal which can be flattering, but also demeaning to the identity of a *Zainichi*. It can be demeaning because it can put the person wearing a *chima chogori* under a lot of pressure. The deliberate stares can make a woman feel very self-consciousness, since she knows the meaning of that look. It may arouse in her deep-

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seated memories of a historical past when Korean women were sexually abused during the period of Japan's imperial occupation.

Thus, the significance of *chima chogori* in Japanese society is to be interpreted not only as an "ethnic costume" of a *Zainichi*, but a symbolic representation of sexuality, gender, and historically constructed socio-political relations. I create and recreate by weaving, dyeing and embroidering ethnic costume, making a conscious effort to explore and understand the historical and contemporary meanings of identities associated with a particular dress. The *chima chogori* is traditionally associated with the *Zainichi*, yet sometimes identifying completely with the *chima chogori* can be a problem for the reasons I have explained above. Thus, I have attempted to create a dress which can be related to, but not completely identified with a *chima chogori*.

Inside of her skirt, 2006

Holding the memory

I created this art work in 2006.

Memory

The fragments spill down
 A memory etched on each fragment
 Nowhere to go,
 Floating, sinking, again and again,
 I scoop up the fragments with cupped hands
 And again, they spill,
 Again, they float and sink,
 Over and over again.

(Translation: Rebecca Jennison)

A snow white skirt made from organdy with a long train that spreads itself across the floor. Delicate floral patterns are printed on this skirt. Suspended from the ceiling are pleated white thick strands of silk that reach the top of a table and then sweep down to the floor. Also on display are three photographs on the side walls. Each photograph shows



Inside of her skirt, 2006.

Material: Polyester, silk yarn, ink, bobbin, mirror, bulb

Technique: Silkscreen printing

different images of my grandmother's *chogori*.

As I look at *chima chogori* that my grandmother left, I
feel as if she is here.

Many things were wrapped in her skirt.

I printed the design on the cloth, again and again,
Each print, another fragment of memory.

The soft, white train of the skirt
Spreads on the wooden floor, endlessly,
Here are her memories, that I cannot know.

Have they vanished, along with her body that exists no
more?

No memory is certain,

But I imagine something was there,

For my grandmother and the women of her generation.

(Translation: Rebecca Jennison)

I was motivated to create this art work after my grandmother died. Before she died, I had watched her lying in bed at the hospital. I felt that her body was somehow empty. Her mind, emotions and spirit had already traveled someplace else. Watching her lie there, quietly, I wondered how she must have felt about her life in Japan.

I had never heard her talk about that. She never spoke about it, and I did not ask her. Somehow in our everyday lives we did not seem to have the time to talk about this subject.

Her voice is silent; yet that silence speaks because of her deliberate attempt to silence it. She had memories she could not voice. My art work is an attempt to reach those experiences...

I could not share my grandmother's memories when she was alive. I will never share them with her now that she is dead. Her voice is silent; yet that silence speaks because of her deliberate attempt to silence it. She had memories she could not voice. My art work is an attempt to reach those experiences, those memories that defined her identity.

You may find some difficulty or ambiguity in understanding my position as an artist through this discussion of my four works. It may be useful for artists to state their positions and relation to the subject of their works in order to make her messages clear and precise. However, I feel some hesitation in clarifying my position as an artist in relation to the subject of my work. This is because by doing so, even though my art works are based on my experience, there is a risk of symbolizing the subject. Generally speaking I feel something can be lost when the relationship between artists and the subjects of their works is made too clear. For me, it is crucial to explore how those things lost through the clarification of artists' positions are related to the subjects of their works. This question also leads us to ask, for whom do the artists create their works? And, how does the status of a particular observation influence the way in which the viewer looks at a particular work of art? For example, if an observer looks at my works from the perspective of *Zainichi* as "other," or the perspective of *Zainichi* as "us," the meaning may be changed.

I am still grappling with the issue of how to present the dynamics of the changing relationship between the artist, her/his subject, and the observer. Perhaps we will be able to touch on that topic in the following discussion. Thank you very much.

Ms. OH gave her talk on May 1, 2009 at York University in Toronto, Canada.

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MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haji OH lives in Japan as a third-generation *Zainichi* ("living in Japan") Korean. Deeply derived from her own lived experiences, she explores in her work how "silent-memories" are expressed by using fibre and textiles. Empathizing with Diaspora (dispersion of people from homeland), she weaved, sewed and joined threads and cloths together to express her memories and feelings, giving a hard look at her past life and future. Recently, she has also used text and sound, along with textiles, in her work. Further information about Ms. OH and her work is also available from: [http:// hajioh.com](http://hajioh.com).

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For more information, please contact the York Centre for Asian Research at:

ycar@yorku.ca